DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 122 608 FL 007 570

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TITLE Politeness Pays. Creativity: New Ideas in Language Teaching, No. 15.
INSTITUTION Instituto de Idiomas Yazigi, Sao Paulo (Brazil). Centro de Linguistica Aplicada.
PUB DATE Jul 75
NOTE 4p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS Communication Skills; *English (Second Language); *Language Instruction; *Language Usage; Oral Communication; Second Language Learning; Social Behavior; *Sociolinguistics; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

Politeness is discussed as an integral part of human conversational interaction. Awareness of politeness is important to understanding proper language usage. Several sentences may perform the same function but vary in tone from a command to an extremely polite request. Foreign language instruction should expose learners to politeness and the varying forms of expressing requests. Handling politeness in the teaching-learning process is discussed in general, and the specific treatment of politeness in three EFL (English as a foreign language) textbooks is discussed. Volume 3 of the "Yazigi English Program" of the Centro de Linguistica Aplicada of the Instituto de Idiomas Yazigi in Sao Paulo shows teachers how to present a "Think and Choose an Opening" section on polite English dialogue. The exercises make the student select most polite, next polite and least polite dialogue sentences to use in specific situations. Two sample questions and the description of the technique given in the teacher's manual are provided here. (CHK)

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Creativity
New ideas in language teaching
Yázigi Yázigi Yázigi

No. 15 July, 1975

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH EDUCATION & WELFARE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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POLITENESS PAYS

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Politeness and Linguists

Nobody would ever question the importance of one's having good manners, being respectful and showing consideration for other people according to social norms, since this is an attribute expected of all members of an educated group or community. That type of behavior, described by the noun *politeness*, is an integral part of human conversational interaction. Interestingly enough, the subject of politeness is being given increasing attention in the scientific literature, especially that of Linguistics. The American linguist Robin Lakoff, for example, wrote a paper on *The logic of politeness or Minding your P's and Q's*[1]. In a recent article she draws our attention to the fact that "an understanding of the operation and problems... of politeness rules... is at the very basis of human interaction"[2]. She also reminds us that ..."politeness interacts with syntactic phenomena."

Bruce L. Liles[3], points out that the difference between two sentences may involve politeness rather than function. He gives the following example of a scale of politeness:

Wait in the outer office.
Wait in the outer office, please.
Would you wait in the outer office?
Would you mind waiting in the outer office?
Would you like to wait in the outer office?

Liles reminds us that "tone of voice, facial expressions and general posture of the speaker can add to the politeness or rudeness of any of the sentences ..."[6]

If we accept Bolinger's characterization of language as "a means and product of social interaction"[4], and if we endorse Rivers' cogent statement to the effect that "When selecting learning activities we must always remember that our goal is for the students to be able to interact freely with others"[5], we will come to the conclusion that any realistic foreign language teaching program should exposure learners to politeness, since, as Wilkins[6] puts it, it is "a form of interpersonal relation"... or a "category of communicative function appropriate to relationship of participants in the event". Whether we consider politeness as a psychological or as a situational set of speech acts, the truth of the matter is that it should have a place of its own in the design and construction of teaching-learning materials.

Exposing our students to politeness is, of course, only part of a broader exposure to variety. Bowen[7] summarizes this pedagogical attitude very well when he says "The schools, and more specifically the language classrooms, must accept responsibility for providing specifics for the useful varieties and ranges of registers, and must do so on the productive level. An ability to receive and interpret is not enough". Granted, then, the unquestionable need for helping learners to make use of polite verbal/written patterns, we might well ask now: do existing materials, especially for teaching English as a foreign language, meet such crucial communicative need? A look at some current textbooks shows that only very negligible, minimal attention is given to the pedagogical treatment of BEING POLITE in ENGLISH: the subject is often handled in a single lesson.

Politeness in EFL Texts

In *English Sentence Structure* by Robert Krohn and the staff of the English Language Institute (University of Michigan Press, 1971), politeness is dealt with in Lesson 7, through a tripartite contrast of request sentences:

POSITIVE: Please open your books.
POLITE POSITIVE: Would you please open your books.
NEGATIVE: Please don't open your books.

That sourcebook and drillbook encourages students to "form polite request sentences"(67).

In his *Grammar for Use*, Vol. 2, (Silver Spring, Maryland: Institute of Modern Languages, 1974), Eugene J. Hall describes *We'll see you tomorrow* as a "polite formula of which there are several variants in English" (189). That methodologist devotes a page to Polite Requests (224-5).

Among the "polite expressions for requests" he mentions

Please...
Will you...
Do you mind...
Would you mind...

As a practical application, Hall asks the student to change some sentences to a polite form (pp. 226-9).

In unit 3 of William E. Rutherford's *Modern English* (2nd edition; New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1975), there's a pedagogical treatment of Offers, Requests and Suggestions in the imperative and interrogative forms, and there are exercises which challenge the learner to restate a sentence in a more polite or in a less polite form.

According to Rutherford, "The interaction of PLEASE with WILL YOU and WON'T YOU for offers, and with WOULD YOU for requests, produces varying degrees of politeness"(44), so that for example, WON'T YOU PLEASE COME IN? would be the most polite point in a scale, and GET IN HERE! would be the least polite item.

Reading Corder's discussion of Language Teaching and the function of Language[8] helps reminds us that we should keep our students from making false judgements as to speakers of a language being more polite than those of another. That British applied linguist illustrates the point by saying that "In Britain, for example, we do not have a ritual reply to an expression of thanks, as in America, YOU'RE WELCOME, or France, JE VOUS EN PRIE, or Germany, BITTE. But this does not mean that there is no appropriate verbal response in such a situation – only that its form is less predictable." (47)

Toward More Polite Language Learning

Should POLITENESS be handled at different stages (elementary, intermediate, advanced) of the teaching-learning process? This is what seems to be suggested by the psycholinguists Jakobovits and Gordon[9] after listing what they call "transactional idioms" for Asking Permission:

May I, please . . .
May I . . .
Could I . . .
Could I, please . . .
I wonder if it would be possible for me to . . .
Do you think I could . . .
Do you think I could possibly . . .
I'm sorry for disturbing you, but can I . . .
Do you mind if I ask you whether I could . . . (64-65)

Asking Permission

In an excellent article on Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching[10], Criper and Widdowson draw attention to the fact that "the language learner needs to be aware that there is no one-to-one correspondence between messages and code forms."

They cogently suggest that teaching materials should be developed "which would make the learners aware of the attendant conditions of different communicative acts and to show them how different linguistic forms relate to such conditions". (206). Those two British applied linguists also discuss problems concerning the learner's productive competence in a foreign language. To them, "the learner has to know which form to select in a given set of circumstances", and they add that "Here there would seem to be a case for selecting forms at one or two different points on a scale of mitigation and politeness."

The "teaching of language in use" as those authors put it, certainly poses a challenge to constructors of FLT materials. The Centro de Lingüística Aplicada of the Instituto de Idiomas Yázigi, in trying to subject the grammatical content of Volume 3, YÁZIGI ENGLISH PROGRAM (São Paulo: Difusão Nacional do Livro, 1975) to a sociolinguistic treatment, opted for a new activity, THINK AND CHOOSE AN OPENING.

Here are two examples – there is one such activity in every lesson – from the workbook accompanying YEP 3:

Identify each 'dialogue opening' below by writing the number 3 for the MOST POLITE CHOICE, the number 2 for the NEXT or SO-SO POLITE CHOICE and the number 1 for the LEAST POLITE CHOICE.

You are in a doctor's office. The receptionist says to you:

_____ a. Won't you please have a seat? The doctor's still busy.
_____ b. Please have a seat. The doctor's still busy.
_____ c. Sit down. The doctor's still busy.

An English-speaking visitor is giving a talk to your group. You want to ask him/her something. You say:

_____ c. Excuse me, may I please ask a question?
_____ a. I ('ve) got a question.
_____ b. Excuse me, I have a question.

Here is the presentation of the technique as described in the Teacher's Manual:

HOW TO PRESENT THE THINK AND CHOOSE AN OPENING

1. INTRODUCTION – BOOKS CLOSED
2. SUBGROUPS FOR CHOICES AND ORDERING OF CHOICES – BOOKS OPEN
3. REPORTING OF DECISION AND JUSTIFICATION – BOOKS OPEN
4. CLASS DISCUSSION OF CHOICES AND JUSTIFICATION – BOOKS OPEN
5. FINAL CHOICES WRITTEN ON BOARD – BOOKS OPEN
6. COMPLETION OF "OPENINGS" – BOOKS OPEN

1. Say: 'Let's see if you can solve a problem. (on the board write and say: 1) A coke, please; 2) Give me a coke, please; and 3) May I have a coke, please?). The problem is, which of these three sentences would you say in this situation: You are in a snack bar. You say to the waiter . . . (read the three choices again.) (Wait for responses). Good.'

   You choose the last sentence because it is the *most polite*; number two is the *next polite* choice and the first sentence is the *least polite* choice. In this activity, THINK AND CHOOSE AN OPENING, you are going to choose a sentence that you think is the best one for the situation.

2. Say: 'Now, form into groups and turn to page _____ in your workbook.
   You have 3 minutes to decide on 1) the least polite choice; 2) the next or so-so polite choice and 3) the most polite choice.

   REMEMBER there are no "wrong answers". The answer depends on the situation. Let's begin!'

3. Walk around from group to group and make sure one person is prepared to report the group's decisions. After all have finished, one person from each group reports to the class the decision and the justification for the decision.

4. After each group has given their choices, have a class discussion of the choices and the justification for the choices.

5. Say: 'Very good. Now let's see if your group can write down another sentence to complete the "opening". For example, in the snack bar we choose: 'May I have a coke, please?' You could complete this opening by having the waiter say: 'OK, coming up.' Wait for the group to finish the opening and then have one person from each group 'act out' the dialogue.

Our own experience (at the Yázigi Institute schools where the THINK AND CHOOSE AN OPENING was tried out) shows that students enjoy learning how to express politeness. They also feel like exploring further that aspect of interpersonal communication.

While some carryover from Brazilian Portuguese "politeness rules" may be seen to take place – after all, being polite seems to be a universal human trait – the systematic use of polite formulas and expressions from English-speaking cultures lends greater authenticity and realism to conversations in the foreign language. For one thing, it makes learners more keenly aware of the interplay of language structure and language use in social interaction. Would you (TEFL/TESL teacher) kindly consider adding politeness to your course content? Instead of presenting socially neutral exercises, let's teach our students that POLITENESS PAYS!

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